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Description

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DESCRIPTION

OF

WEYER'S CAVE

IN

AUGUSTA COUNTY, VIRGINIA.

— ... —
1852.

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WEYER'S CAVE,

IN

AUGUSTA COUNTY, VIRGINIA.

1852.

1866, June 29.

Dept. of

C. H. Hoasser
Paymaster U. S. S.

DESCRIPTION.

WEYER'S CAVE is the most remarkable cavern at present known.

The Grotto of Antiparas, in one of the Cyclades Islands in the Grecian Archipelago, is a splendid scene, but it is inconsiderable in extent. Fingal's Cave in Staffa, celebrated for the number and regularity of its basaltic columns, lacks variety. Nicjack Cave, in Georgia, twelve miles in extent, and the famed Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, twenty miles in extent, are remarkable only for dimensions.

Weyer's Cave, for its extent and variety—the singularity of its stalactitic concretions—the disposition of its festooning—the fantastic displays of drapery, and the sublimity and grandeur of its scenery are not surpassed by anything in nature.

The Natural Bridge and the Falls of Niagara are sublime spectacles, and afford to the beholder two or three varied views; but Weyer's Cave presents to the riveted gaze of the enraptured visitor a thousand.

It is situated near the North Eastern extremity of Augusta county, Virginia, seventeen miles from Staunton, sixteen from Waynesborough, eight from Mount Sidney, fourteen from Harrisonburg, and thirty-two from the University of Virginia.

Its entrance is in the Eastern side of a ridge running parallel with the Blue Ridge, and four miles distant from it.

The Western declivity of this ridge is very gradual, and the visitor as he approaches from that direction, little imagines from its appearance that it embowels one of Nature's masterpieces. The Eastern declivity is, however, quite precipitous.

The Guide's house is situated at the Northern extremity of this ridge, and is distant eight hundred yards from the entrance of the Cave. In going from the house to the Cave, you pass near Madison's Cave, which is in the same ridge, and only three hundred yards from it.—Madison's Cave was known and visited as a curiosity long before the discovery of Weyer's, but is now passed by and neglected, as being unworthy of notice, compared with its more imposing rival, although it has had the pen of a Jefferson to describe its beauties.

The ascent from the bottom of the hill to the mouth of the Cave is steep, but is rendered less fatiguing by the zigzag course of the path, which is one hundred and twenty yards in length.

In the year 1804, one Bernard Weyer ranged these hills as a hunter. While pursuing his daily vocation, he found his match in a lawless ground hog, which not only eluded his efforts, but eventually succeeded in carrying off a trap which had been set for his capture. Prompted by the loss of his trap, Weyer made an assault upon the domicil of the depredator with spade and mattock. A few moments' labor brought him to the ante-chamber of this stupendous cavern, where he found his trap deposited.

The entrance was originally small and difficult of access; but the enterprise of the proprietor has obviated these inconveniences. It is now enclosed by a wooden cot, having a door in its centre, which admits you to the ante-chamber.

At the distance of twenty-four feet from the entrance, descending at an angle of 19° , you reach the Statuary Chamber, so called from a number of stalagmites which bear striking resemblance to statues. Immediately above is an opening of considerable beauty called the Gallery. The Sea Nettle is also worthy of notice in this place.

Leaving this room, through a high but narrow passage sixty-six feet in length, with little difficulty you enter Solomon's Temple, one of the finest rooms in the Cave. It is irregular in shape, about thirty feet wide and forty-five long, running at right angles to the main course of the Cave. As you raise your eyes, after descending an inclined pathway to the floor of this room, they rest upon an elevated seat, surrounded by sparry incrustations, which sparkle in the light of your candles.—This has been aptly styled by the nomenclator, Solomon's Throne. On the right is a wave-like folding of incrustations from the ceiling to the floor, resembling a waterfall, called the Cataract; and the figure of a man in the act of leaping, called Sam Patch. At the Eastern extremity is a beautiful pillar of white stalactite,* also named for the wise man.

Passing Solomon's Pillar, you enter another room more irregular but still more beautiful. To convey a correct idea of the beauty of this scene is beyond the powers of description. I shall, therefore, merely observe, that the ceiling, which is variegated and brilliant, is thickly set with stalactites resembling pointed shells, and is therefore called the Shell Room. As this is not the main passage through the Cave, we return and ascend a flight of steps ten feet, opposite to the entrance to Solomon's Temple, to the Porter's Lodge; thence under a swinging gallery to the Pantheon. Here are a number of

* *Stalactite*, from the Greek, *Stalasso*, (I drop.)

small stalagmites resembling heathen deities, and the Madona and infant, and other fancied resemblance to birds and beasts.

From the Pantheon two passages run off to the left; the first one to a large, irregular room, called the Lawyer's office, in which is a fine spring or rather reservoir of water collected,—dropping from the roof; the other, through a passage to what is called the Armory, from an incrustation that has received the name of Ajax's Shield. Between the Lawyer's Office and the Armory, and communicating with both, is another large, irregular apartment, which is named Weyer's Hall, for the discoverer of the Cave, who, together with his dog, stands immortalized in one corner.

We now returned to the Pantheon, and proceeded along the main passage of the Cave to the Twin Room. Here are several pairs of stalactites and stalagmites,* called the Twins. This apartment is small, but the crystallization is perfect to the surface of the stalactitic concretions that form the ceiling, which is laid off in fret and filigree work.

Next is the balustrade Room, containing regular formations which would naturally suggest the name. The Arch here suddenly expands, and is elevated to the height of thirty feet, and by dint of hard climbing you may return to the Porter's Lodge, through a passage directly over the one which you have just passed. There are many beauties in this upper passage.

At the distance of thirty-nine feet from the Twin Room, in a direction due West, you descend into the Tapestry Room, which contains many beauties.

There is a great number of calcarious deposites in this place, which give variety to the scene. There is much here that represents fine drapery fantastically arranged, which suggested the name for this apartment. Further along, from a different position, affording an entire different and most magnificent view, it is styled the Cathedral. Here are representations of the Bishop, the Desk, the Bishop's Seat, and a variety of huge columns and massive pillars lying in confusion over the floor, which represents the ruins of an ancient castle. A still further continuation of this room, at an elevation of ten feet, is the Drum Room, named from a thin stalactitic partition extending from the ceiling to the floor, and which emits by a gentle tap, a deep tone like the bass drum.

You leave the Drum Room by a flight of natural steps, seven feet in perpendicular height, and then descend upon substantial artificial steps, ten feet, into the far-famed Ball Room, one hundred feet long, thirty-six feet wide and twenty-five feet high, running at right angles to the path by which you entered it. The general bearing of the room is N. E. and S. W., but at the Northern extremity there is a gradual ascent, bearing round to the East, until you reach a

* *Stalagmite*, from L. *Stalagmium*.

precipice of twenty feet, from which you can look down into the Tapestry Room, having performed a complete circuit. Near the centre of the Ball Room is a large calcarious deposite, that has received the name of Paganani's Statue, from the circumstance that it furnishes a good position for the music whenever balls are given in these submundane regions. The floor is sufficiently level to admit of dancing upon it, and it is not uncommon for visitors to have dancing in this place.

To approach this apartment while a party of ladies and gentlemen are enjoying the cotillion and thrilling music, produces upon the curious visitor a singular effect. It carries the imagination back to the enchanted caverns of the fabled Aladdin, where fairy princes and princesses in mirthful glee "tript their fantastic toe."

The Ladies are accommodated with a very convenient Dressing Room, the only opening to which communicates directly with the Ball Room. Near the entrance of the Dressing Room hangs in massive folds a stalactitic curtain, denominated the Sounding Board which produces by a gentle thump, a mellow, deep tone like the gong, which communicates more than double effect to the music. (Here the Guide displayed his vocal powers, accompanied by the Sound Board, to the great gratification and amusement of all our party.)

You leave the Ball Room by a gradual ascent of ten feet at the Southern extremity. This acclivity is called Suntag's Hill. A circumstance of unusual novelty occurred that gave rise to this name. A gentleman attached to the French Legation to this country, owing to a singular incident, became immured in what, at that time, he might have considered the most horrible of dungeons. I took the liberty of extracting from the Album of the Cave, Suntag's own account of his perilous adventure:

"This morning, in my way towards Weyer's Cave, reflecting on the fate of those visitors who found their grave in the Catacombs of Rome and Paris, I observed to my young Guide, that his two candles, without any means of re-lighting them in case of accident were not a sufficient provision for such an excursion; but I was far from expecting that I should so soon afford myself an illustration of my remark. After we had gone through all those beautiful grottoes, we were coming back, when my foot happening to slip, I fell, and the commotion occasioned in the air by that fall extinguished the two candles. A deeper darkness cannot exist, and our first impression was one most unpleasant; but soon recovering his presence of mind, my Guide undertook to direct me through that fearful obscurity and out of those dangerous defiles. After half an hour passed in this situation, we began to see the light of the sun, and soon got out of the Cave, without other accident. I cannot commend

enough the intelligence, skill and intrepidity of young Mohler,* and I am much indebted to him for his attentions, attended with great danger to himself, for he tried every foot of ground in our way, and went frequently reconnoitering in different directions, in order not to miss the right one."

The visitor next proceeds through the Narrow Passage, fifty-two feet in length, varying from three to five feet in width, and from four to eight in height. It leads to the brink of a precipice twelve feet high. Natural indentations in this declivity afford a convenient means of descent, and these natural steps have received the name of Jacob's Ladder. A flat rock on one side is called the Tea Table, and a deep, inaccessible recess to the left of the Passage is called the Ice House. You next proceed to Senate Chamber, through an irregular low passage, one hundred feet from Jacob's Ladder. A regular flat rock of calcarious deposite, at the height of ten feet, stretches over half of this Chamber, which is fifty feet in diameter. This horizontal rock is called the gallery, and perhaps suggested the name for this apartment. It presents to the speculative mind a mystery that will baffle all speculation. How those pendant stalactites are formed, and assume their perpendicular position, is a matter readily accounted for: but how this stalactitic formation, mathematically regular, could like the spider's web, be thrown across one half of Senate Chamber in an almost horizontal position, so as to form a perfect gallery, is a question which is not so readily solved. At the farther extreme of this apartment, in looking back the eye rests upon regular festooning from the gallery to the opposite side of the room.

Contiguous to this is Congress Hall. This name was given on account of its proximity to the last mentioned—as there is nothing particularly appropriate in the room itself. It is long, spacious, and irregular, and presents a wild, grotesque scene, different from the rest, as it contains but little stalactitic concretion. On the right is a very difficult and muddy passage, leading off about three hundred feet to the Spar Chamber, which contains rich and rare crystals of singular beauty and great variety. Lime crystals are rhomboidal, but by some law of nature, some of these in this spar quarry are elongated, and form well defined dog-tooth-spar. Specimens are obtained in this place for sale, and rate from one to twenty dollars, according to size and beauty.

Our course from Congress Hall, lies to the S. W., up an ascent of ten feet to the Lobby. From this place one acquainted with the Cave may pass through secret passages and by-rooms to the end of

* MR. MOHLER, the Guide alluded to, resides at the Cave, and attends to visitors promptly, and with great cheerfulness, and keeps a very excellent house of entertainment for the accommodation of visitors.

the Cave, without once entering the main path. A descent of ten feet from the Lobby brings you to the most magnificent apartment in the whole cavern.

This is Washington's Hall, so called in token of respect for the memory of our Country's Father, and it is worthy of bearing the name. Its length is two hundred and fifty-seven feet, breadth from twenty to thirty, and thirty feet high, being remarkably level and straight through the whole length. In this room there is a great variety of objects of interest—the Sword of Democles, the Shield of Achilles, the Towers, the Pyramids, &c. Near the centre of this Room is Washington's Statue, an immense deposite of calcareous matter, rising to the height of eight feet, which very strikingly resembles a statue clothed in drapery; and few can look upon it, as seen by the dim light of two or three candles, which rather stimulates curiosity, without experiencing a sensation of awe and solemnity. While the visitor remains at the entrance of this apartment, the Guide passes forward and lights up these objects of interest, and when his light falls upon the statue, "distance lends enchantment to the view." The visitor stands wrapt in amazement; and if there is anything to strike mute in astonishment the proudest fancy and the most brilliant imagination, it is this sublime scene. The mind becomes absorbed in admiration and wonder. It loses the power of reflection, and is hurried away in the enthusiasm of the moment; and as it dreams in after nights of the sublimity of the scene, it seems as though the reality was the dream, and the retrospect of the disturbed fancy the truth.

Who that beholds the foam white steep,
Where waves in petrification sleep,
Feels not illusion's magic powers
Transport him to enchanted bowers?
What marble forms in Parian mine
So fair as these bright pillars shine?
Or where in fairy grotts are found,
So clothed in beauty, filled with sound,
Such broad and polished sheets of spar
As sparkling here with gem and star,
Dependant from those arches high,
Attract and fix the raptured eye?"

I have said that Washington's Hall was twenty feet wide; this must be understood only of the lower part of the room, as the arch stretches over a rock twenty feet high, which forms the left wall, and embraces another room, called Lady Washington's Hall. The entrance to this is opposite to the statue, and is on a level with the hall, and is not less interesting and elegant, though less magnificent. You leave Washington's Hall at the S. W. extremity, by a

rough, narrow, but high passage, running by the base of the Pyramids and the Leaning Towers.

A descent of eight feet brings you into the Diamond Room, which may be considered a part of the Church, a long, irregular room, more lofty than any we have yet entered. Its length is one hundred and fifty-two feet, breadth from fifteen to twenty, and height fifty feet! at the farther extremity, a beautiful white spire shoots up to a considerable height, which is appropriately styled The Steeple, and has no doubt suggested the name of the room. Nearly opposite to the centre of the Church is a recess, raised several feet, of considerable extent. This forms the Gallery to the Church. Immediately in the rear of the Gallery, and in full view from below, are a great number of pendent stalactites, of several feet in length and of various sizes, regularly ranged like the pipes of an organ, and bear a resemblance to them. When these stalactites are struck with any hard substance, they send forth sounds of different keys, according to their size and length; and a stick run rapidly over them produces a pleasing variety of sounds. With great propriety this is called the The Organ.

Passing under the Steeple, which rests on an arch elevated not more than ten feet, you enter the Dining Room. This room is not quite as large as the Church, but rises to the height of sixty feet.

Proceeding only a few paces on the left, through an uninviting opening, you find yourself in an immense Chamber, stretching from the Gallery of the Church, with which it communicates, parallel to the Dining Room, to its utmost extremity and proportionably wide. With some difficulty, from this place you reach, if not the most magnificent, at least an interesting, beautiful portion of this cavern. There is but one apartment, and that is small, but the Garden of Eden, for so it is called, derives its beauty from the singular arrangement of the immense stalactites, hanging from the roof and meeting the stalagmites which have ascended from the floor to meet them; which seems as if at some former period a sheet of water had poured down from the roof, and by some wonderful process of Nature had become suddenly petrified. This sheet is not continuous but strongly resembles the folds of heavy drapery; and you may pass among the windings as through the mazes of a labyrinth, and the light of a candle shines distinctly through any part of it.

Returning through the Dining Room, you next pass through the Wilderness, thus denominated from the ruggedness of the pathway, and is on the floor only twelve feet wide, but the ceiling expands over immense masses of rock, and rises to the height of seventy feet. On the right wall is a perfect resemblance of a Cascade.

As we come along the Causeway, and look down upon our right, we shall see our Company forty feet below us, while our eyes can scarcely penetrate the darkness to the ceiling above their heads.--

Upon the verge of the rock upon which we are standing are several beautiful white stalagmites grouped together, among which one stands pre-eminent. This is Bonaparte crossing the Alps. The effect is peculiarly fine when viewed from below.

Proceeding only a few paces from the Emperor, you find yourself upon an arch, under which your company are passing, which is appropriately called the Natural Bridge.

You are now upon the lowest level of the Cave, and at the entrance of the farthest room. This is Jefferson's Hall, an extensive but not very elevated apartment, quite level. The thickness of the arch to the surface of the earth above is two hundred feet.—This room is very irregular in shape, two hundred and thirty-five feet long, and contains a great variety of beautiful ornaments. On the right, as you emerge from the Wilderness, rises an immense stalagmitic mass, thirty-six feet in length, thirty feet in breadth, and thirty feet in height. This mass is very beautiful, much resembling successive stories, oval in front, and full of flutings, called the Tower of Babel. The most splendid view is on the back, but somewhat difficult of access. For some moments you can scarcely convince yourself that an immense sheet of water is not pouring over the precipice in a foaming cataract, so white and dazzling is the effulgence of the rock; and when this impression is effaced, the words of the pious Bard rush into the mind, where he describes the awful effects that will follow the consummation of all things :

“The cataract that like a giant wroth,
Rushed down impetuously, as seized at once
By sudden frost, with all his hoary locks,
Stood still ! !”

One might almost imagine that Pollock had visited this wonder, and caught the idea so forcibly expressed, from viewing this magnificent scene.

The other most prominent objects of interest in Jefferson's Hall, are: Minerva with a Spear and a pointed Helmet, the Theatre, the Ladies' Toilet, the Egyptian Mummies, the Coral Bank, the Snow Hill, &c. What is generally termed the end of the Cave is distinguished by two singular thin, lamellar rocks, seven feet in diameter, united at their bases, but spreading out so that their outer edges are several feet apart; this is called the Mammoth Oyster Shell.

Beyond this, though difficult of access, is the Source of the Nile, a beautiful limpid spring, covered over with a thin pellicle of stalagmite, yet sufficiently strong to bear your weight. In this crust there is a perforation that gives access to the water beneath, which serves to slake the thirst of the weary visitor, after a pleasant but fatiguing ramble of sixteen hundred and fifty feet from the entrance.

I have thus faintly delineated some of the features of this most singular scene ; and though we are beyond the farthest point generally visited, there are a thousand and one cavities and side-rooms that I have not named.

“ Still wonders here on wonders crowd,—
But wrapt in their premenial shroud,
Their charms unsung must now remain,
Save in the Genii’s caverned strain ;
For lo! our lights are waning fast,
And beauty’s thoughts are homeward cast.”

Weyer’s Cave must be seen to be known. No pen can portray, no pencil paint, nor imagination conceive of, its grandeur. No one can visit it, however sanguine his expectations, without expressing himself delighted, and well rewarded for the labors of his journey. The following testimonial is from the pen of a distinguished gentleman of Boston.

“ I have twice visited the *Caverns of Matlock* and *Castleton* in Derbyshire, England, and have twice walked in the subterranean streets of *Herculaneum*, in the *Catacombs of Rome*, the tombs of the Scipios, and seen other subterranean wonders of the Old World ; but must confess Weyer’s Cave in Virginia exceeds *them all* in the beauty of its natural ornaments and in its general effect. It is as dry, as well graded and as easy of access as European Caverns. Washington’s Hall, with its splendid hangings, its well wrought fret work, and that wonderful freak of Nature in placing a rude Statue in the centre, is alone worth a pilgrimage to behold.”

Veni vidi victus sum !”

The temperature of the Cave is $54\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ of Fahrenheit, and never changes. It therefore is apparently warm in winter and cool in Summer. The air is bracing, salubrious and healthful.

In visiting the Cave, Ladies should be provided with thin shawls and with thick shoes.

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